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AUTHOR Forbes, Norma
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ABSTRACT

The development of the Satellite Television Demonstration Project in Alaska, delivering commercial entertainment television, is briefly described; and important educational issues related to the delivery and usage of commercial television via satellite in Alaska are discussed, including (1) justification for the demonstration project; (2) implementation of the project; (3) the project as an opportunity for research on the effects of commercial television on rural native populations in Alaska; and (4) possible beneficial and harmful cognitive and affective influences of commercial television in Alaska, especially when delivered to rural children in their schools. Several studies related to relevant television and minority culture research are cited. (CMV)

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ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION IN RURAL ALASKA:

HOW WILL IT AFFECT THE SCHOOL?

Norma Forbes
Alaska TV Project
Psychology Department
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington

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ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION IN RURAL ALASKA
HOW WILL IT AFFECT THE SCHOOL?

In early 1977, the state of Alaska began delivery of commercial entertainment television via the Satellite Television Demonstration Project. Initial plans for the satellite had been based on its utility for bringing telephone service to remote communities where other telephone systems were not feasible. However, when legislators from rural areas realized the satellite could also beam television to their constituents, they introduced legislation for the demonstration project. Legislators from urban areas of Alaska were, for the most part, willing to support such a project because it would also bring live news and sports to Alaskan cities--cities which had previously received time-value programs such as news via tapes sent from Seattle. The justification for investment of state funds to support the Satellite Demonstration Project was Alaska's difficult communications problems, problems more severe than those of any other state in the United States. Alaska has the smallest population of any state, but that population is spread over an area one-fifth the size of the entire continental United States. Two-thirds of the communities in Alaska have no access to ground transportation. Health and education services to rural communities are limited by the same factors which limit communications. Alaskan Natives,* Eskimo, Aleut, and Indian, make up approximately seventeen per cent of the state's population. Three-fourths of these Alaskan Natives live in the state's remote rural areas where their cultural, and in some areas linguistic uniqueness has been maintained to a degree not possible in urban areas. Bringing

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*The term Native, with a capital N, is used in Alaska to refer to the state's aboriginal inhabitants which include Eskimos, Aleuts, Athapascans, Tlingits, and Haidas. The term native, with a small n, refers to Natives and non-Natives born and reared in Alaska.

health, educational, and other government services to Natives and their children presents a major challenge to the state government.

The state's Department of Education has made an admirable effort to exploit the satellite delivery system through their current Education Television for Alaska Project, which does not involve video programming, and through use of available video programming during the daytime hours assigned to it on Satellite Demonstration Project time. However, like most educational systems in the United States, it has not attempted to utilize commercial programming for educational purposes. Nor has it given any official recognition to the potential educational implications of the introduction of commercial television into the homes of its rural citizens.

Prior to the introduction of satellite commercial TV, there were several short-term experiments which brought television in various forms to a few rural communities. Evaluation or research reports are available from these experiments. However, at the present time the only systematic effort to examine television's effects in rural Alaska is the National Science Foundation-funded study of the social and behavioral effects of television on previously TV-naive Alaskan children. This study originated at the University of Alaska's Center for Northern Educational Research in 1976 and is now being continued through Western Washington University's Psychology department. The Satellite Television Demonstration Project serendipituously created a unique opportunity to assess TV's effects in a natural field setting, an opportunity which the University of Alaska/Western Washington University's study is exploiting. The uniform delivery of one channel of programs throughout the state effectively controls the viewer's television diet without the need for external controls. In addition, certain rural communities are not receiving satellite TV while

other similar communities in the same geographical and cultural area are--a situation which provides for an experimental vs. comparison group design.

This unusual delivery system for commercial television not only presents a unique opportunity for researchers, it also presents unique ethical questions, both educational and political, for state policy makers. The question of whether expenditure of sums for delivery of commercial television should precede expenditures for delivery of running water or sewage disposal is essentially irrelevant since the demand for TV is great enough to give it political priority. However, the selection of programming is not an irrelevant question. The state has assiduously avoided involving itself in the political controversy of program selection by first placing the responsibility with the Alaska Federation of Natives' telecommunications committee, which had been created to provide advice on the technical aspects on the delivery system, then, recently, transferring that responsibility to a commercial organization based in the continental United States.

Educators are aware of the effect on educational achievement of such background variables as family socio-economic status, birth order, and the presence of books and newspapers in the home. Educators and social critics also have expressed concern about commercial television's effects, although not as much concern as they might when one considers that the average child spends at least three hours a day watching television (Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts, 1978).

Research evidence indicates that both affective and cognitive learning occur when children watch commercial TV. Comstock et al. (1978), in their review of current findings, point out that television is a major source of information about a number of topics: politics and government, drugs, weather,

sequences in which important events occur, and the motives and consequences of portrayed behavior. Hornik (1977) has found evidence that the introduction of commercial television to previously television-naive children has long-term negative effects on reading skills, as well as more basic general academic skills, although no short-term effects on those same children had been found.

Results from other studies involving television-naive children are mixed. An anthropological study of the introduction of television in the Canadian North includes anecdotal reports of improved and accelerated use of English by local Eskimos but decreased use of library facilities by both Eskimos and whites (Watson, 1977). A study of an Alaskan Eskimo village which had television for a six-month period found some improvement in English vocabulary but no overall effect on English language usage or academic achievement (Madigan & Peterson, 1974). Introducing television to a non-Indian rural British Columbia community produced some evidence of decreased reading ability but no effect on vocabulary (Corteen, 1977). These results, plus the well-known effect on number skills of educational TV shows such as Sesame Street, suggest that a child brings to school a different information base and different skills after exposure to television in the home which, in turn, demands that the educational system be modified in response to these changes, positive or negative.

Although cognitive learning from commercial TV will have an impact on education, it is perhaps the occurrence of affective learning which will have the greatest and most pervasive effect. Authorities in the field of television research (Huston-Stein, 1977, Gerbner & Gross, 1976, Liefer, Gordon & Graves, 1974) regard television as an agent of socialization or enculturation on par with family and peers. Gerbner points out that most television fare is

created by members of a small, relatively homogenous, group of people, not representative of the population as a whole. He also makes the point that never before in the history of man have all ethnic groups, ages, and sexes been exposed to a uniform source of influence such as commercial TV. In times past the elders of each society communicated to the next generation through legends and myths their picture of how the world functions--who holds power, who are the aggressors, who are the victims, what are the appropriate patterns of social interaction, where one might expect danger, and where one might be able to trust and feel secure. Now TV brings to all children its own myths and legends, its own picture of how the world functions.

In rural Alaska, the children who are now being introduced to television are from cultures whose values and beliefs differ from those of the television writer or producer. They bring to the television viewing experience, as well as to the educational experience, characteristics which can be expected to modify television's influence. Comstock et al. (1978) present a model for study of the influence of television which is directly relevent to the question of television's influence on minority and/or television-naive children. The model has the following features:

> Sequential relationships are specified among the variables that appear most essential to an understanding of the way television influences behavior. These include perceptions of television content (e.g., perceived reality, and perceived consequences of behavior), "black box" intra-individual processes (e.g., generalized arousal, inhibition, reinforcement, and catharsis), and situational contingencies (e.g., opportunity, consequences).
>
> There is provision for branching to different processes, depending on combinations of the above factors, and on whether the behavioral act in question occurs or not.
>
> There are cumulative effects over repeated cycles through the hypothesized sequences of events (p. 399).

The model represents the path of one person over time. Results, summed over many persons, would correspond to aggregrate social behavior. Values

assigned for a given person would depend upon "... the probabilities of his experiencing particular television stimuli, the probabilities of his encountering certain environmental contingencies such as the opportunity to act, ... rewards and punishments for his acts" (p. 400) and his accumulated learning. We will not describe the model further, but we can look at some of the antecedent conditions, such as personal characteristics or accumulated learning, which an individual brings to the television viewing situation.

The perceived reality of a television program has been shown to enhance its effects on children and on their comprehension of portrayed events as appropriate in the real world (Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963). The Rankin Inlet study of television in the Canadian North reports considerable confusion over what is reality and what is fictional among all age groups (Watson, 1977). Anecdotal reports from a number of Satellite Demonstration Project villages in Alaska also report confusion about the reality of television programs. This suggests that rural Alaskan children, and adults, will be more vulnerable to the influence of television than their urban American peers. Increased impact as the result of the interaction between naivete and program content would explain the pattern of children's increased physical and verbal aggression which was reported from the study of the introduction of television to rural British Columbia communities (Joy, Kimball, & Zabrack, 1977).

Perceived consequences and motivation of behavior also have been shown to mediate the nature and degree of television's effects. We can only hypothesize about how the actions of "Charlie's Angels" are perceived in terms of motivations and consequences by rural Eskimo children. There is a particular need for research in this area to improve our ability to interpret and predict behavioral consequences of TV viewing by minority children. An example of

differences in perception is the comment by an elderly Eskimo to an anthropologist. He said his favorite program was the one about the "medicine man." Further questioning determined that he was referring to "Spider Man" whom he perceived as a shaman or medicine man because he could change his shape.

Several studies in the Canadian North report that there is an increased interest in, and desire to work in, more urban and southern locations after exposure to television (Coldevin, 1975 and Watson, 1977). If such increased interest results in increased migration to urban locations by rural village young people, we need to know more about what they perceive as attractive in urban areas, and whether they perceive an instrumental connection between education and success in urban locations. Without such knowledge they cannot be adequately prepared for life outside the village setting.

Most of what we know about the effects of TV on minority children or their viewing patterns comes from studies of urban blacks. These studies suggest a distinctive pattern of effects and of viewing for ethnic minority children, but there is almost no evidence available for minorities other than blacks. We know that, for black children, perceived ethnicity and status of portrayed models mediate acquisition of information from television (Comstock and Cobbey, 1979). High entertainment television viewing is accompanied by low self-esteem among black but not white audiences (Tan and Tan, 1979). Tan and Tan interpret this as an effect of the preponderance of whites in high-status and hero roles on television, hypothesizing that negative stereotypes on television may be an important factor in shaping negative self-images within the stereotyped group. Since American Indians, Eskimos, or Orientals are relatively rarely portrayed on television, the potential impact of the black or white role models portrayed may be quite different for rural Alaskan children. Whether

the simple absence of like-ethnic positive role models on television would be a factor in lowering self-image is at the present an open question.

Our on-going study of the effects of satellite delivery of TV in rural Alaska hopes to contribute answers to at least some of the above questions. The 1976-77 University of Alaska study provided pre-television baseline data and some ethnographic information on community settings. Dr. Walter Lonner, of Western Washington University, and I are continuing and expanding that study. We completed the data collection last week and expect to complete the bulk of the data analysis this summer. Data were collected from five pairs of sites. Each site included one village which did receive television and one village that did not. Two pairs of sites are in the northwest Eskimo area, one pair is Athapascan Indian, one pair is Aleut, and one pair is Tlingit/Haida Indian. The inclusion of four culture areas in the design offers a dimension of information not usually available from studies of television. As Brislin, Lonner, Thorndike (1973) have pointed out, a researcher, by gathering data in another culture, obtains experimental treatments not available in his own culture and increases the predictive range of his hypotheses. In terms of Comstock's previously described model, the inclusion of different culture groups allows us to examine the mediating effects of antecedent conditions such as the minority child's perception of his own group's status in relation to that of the majority as portrayed on television. Both cognitive and affective measures are included in the study. In three pairs of sites we will be looking at cross-sectional data as well as longitudinal data--comparing television to non-television sites and looking at possible changes in the television village after two years of commercial TV. The other two pairs of sites were added to the study this year and represent

a greatly expanded sample suitable for longitudinal study. Cognitive measures include Raven's Matrices, Embedded Figure Test, and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The Peabody, as we are using it in these settings, would perhaps better be described as a measure of acculturative vocabulary. Affective measures include measures of sex role perceptions, world view, geocentrism, ethnicity, self-esteem locus-of-control, educational and occupational aspirations and expectations, appropriate interpersonal interactions, and fantasy aggression. Information is also being gathered on factors such as parents' education, previous exposure to television, and perception of reality in television programs, which may act as antecedent conditions mediating the effect of TV.

Twenty years ago, after one of the classic large-scale investigations of television's impact on children, Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) questioned whether schools were doing enough with and about the medium. Comstock and Cobbey (1979), in their current article on television and minority children, state that the situation remains the same: schools have done more but television has become an even larger component of the modern environment. Rural Alaskan educators must recognize and adapt to the changing skills, attitudes, and aspirations which rural Alaskan children will bring to the educational experience as a result of exposure to commercial television. Ideally, they will use the medium to enrich learning and ease the transition for those students who choose to leave the villages and enter contemporary society.

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